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Improving the Quality of DoD's Civilian Workforce

Guidance for the Office of the Chancellor for Education and Professional Development

With a civilian workforce of about 700,000, the Department of Defense (DoD) is one of the largest employers of civilians in the nation. In an era of streamlining, demographic change, low unemployment, and rapid technological change—education, training, and development, collectively known as ET&D, play a critical role in maintaining and improving the quality of this workforce and of the defense infrastructure.

In October 1998, the DoD established the Office of the Chancellor for Education and Professional Development to serve as the principal advocate for the academic quality and cost-effectiveness of all institutions, programs, and courses of instruction that serve DoD civilian workers. The Chancellor's office, which operates within the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), is part of a complex network of organizations that set policy for ET&D, manage the DoD civilian workforce, and provide ET&D services to DoD civilians. To carry out its mission, the office needs to develop a strategic performance and planning process.

At the request of the Chancellor's office, RAND's National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) conducted case studies of strategic planning in comparable institutions with reputations for high performance. The results of this research are contained in a new RAND report, *Strategic and Performance Planning for the Office of the Chancellor for Education and Professional Development in the Department of Defense*. The study identified near-term actions, as well as medium-term and lifelong strategies, for the Chancellor's office. Among the recommendations is that the Chancellor's office focus on becoming the DoD educational information center in the near term while

seeking, over the medium term, to develop a role in the program approval process. Over its lifetime, the office will need to play a flexible role while building a constituency for reform.

TRENDS AFFECTING DoD CIVILIAN EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND DEVELOPMENT

The strategic planning process for the Chancellor's office is affected by current and future trends involving ET&D programs. Four major trends were identified in the study.

The future military operating environment will require a highly skilled civilian workforce. The fighting force of the future will be technology-intensive, leaner, and more efficient in conducting high-precision, timely, information-intensive operations. To support these forces, the civilian workforce will need to be proficient in technology, problem-solving, and communication skills, and be able to work within and across complex organizations.

The DoD will need to expand ET&D programs to meet the demands of both a growing number of new recruits and an aging workforce. Because the workforce will increasingly need more advanced skills, ET&D programs will likely bear some of the responsibility for teaching those skills. These efforts will need to be geared toward both new recruits—whose numbers are expected to increase greatly over the next 14 years—and more mature workers. Moreover, if the U.S. economy remains strong over this period, the DoD may face increased competition in hiring, which could result in the recruitment of less-skilled workers and an even greater need for DoD civilian ET&D.

Recent federal laws promoting strategic planning and outcomes-based assessment support the efforts of the Chancellor's office. In the 1990s, Congress passed several laws that address waste and inefficiency in federal agencies. This movement has created an atmosphere that is supportive of the efforts of the Chancellor's office to ensure quality and cost-effectiveness in DoD civilian ET&D. Potentially the most important of recent laws for the office is the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993, which mandates that the largest federal agencies submit five-year strategic plans and annual performance plans along with their budget requests to Congress.

The Chancellor's office should also benefit from quality assurance efforts currently under way in higher education. Increasing demands for greater accountability for public spending are requiring that higher education institutions demonstrate both their effectiveness and their efforts at improvement. As a result, many institutions are establishing means to measure quality and increase cost-effectiveness.

MULTIPLE STAKEHOLDERS AND LIMITED DIRECT AUTHORITY POSE CHALLENGES FOR THE CHANCELLOR'S OFFICE

The Chancellor's office must seek to address the complexities inherent in the DoD's system for providing civilian education, training, and development. The study identified two categories of challenges. The first concerns how ET&D can best be used as a tool to improve the workforce. This task is made more complex because of the great number of stakeholders—in addition to the Chancellor's office itself—who are involved in civilian ET&D. Each group of stakeholders brings its own set of challenges.

ET&D providers. The OSD currently sponsors more than 20 institutions and numerous programs and independent courses of instruction serving DoD civilians. Countless other courses and programs are available through institutions run by the services. These providers deliver technical training, professional development, and postsecondary education through the graduate level in a variety of disciplines. The wide variety of ET&D programs presents challenges in terms of planning and managing the system and complicates the formation of a uniform set of criteria for evaluating quality and cost-effectiveness.

Customers. The customer base consists of the approximately 700,000 civil service employees working for the DoD, their managers, the organizations employing them, and other organizations interested in the skill level of the DoD workforce. The sheer size and geographic dispersion of the student population complicate the management and delivery of ET&D and present problems for tracking stu-

dent performance. In addition, many workers have reached the highest level they can attain in their career fields and have less incentive to pursue professional development. The customer dimension also involves multiple federal agencies, accrediting organizations, OSD staff, and DoD program and institutional sponsors—all with an interest in or responsibility for DoD ET&D.

The second category of challenges—and perhaps the key issue facing the Chancellor's office—is how to effect change in a complex system within which it has little authority. As the principal advocate for the academic quality and cost-effectiveness of all DoD institutions, programs, and courses of instruction that provide education or professional development for DoD civilians, the office is neither a direct consumer nor a producer of ET&D activities but rather a resource available to the key customers and providers. It has only limited authority over funds, institutions, programs, and courses of instruction. Moreover, ET&D is just one element of the DoD's much larger workforce planning strategy. Currently, the DoD lacks a conceptual framework to articulate the organization's overarching educational needs and help persuade sponsors to provide adequate resources to support needed changes.

CASE STUDIES PROVIDE EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

To identify strategies that the Chancellor's office can use to fulfill its mission and address key challenges, the researchers examined the strategic planning efforts of 13 organizations known among their peers for "best practices." The case studies involved seven organizational types, two of which—state boards of higher education and federal agencies—shared the most characteristics with the Chancellor's office. Other organizational types included accrediting agencies, corporate universities and human resources departments, DoD professional military ET&D systems, higher education systems and universities, and professional societies and labor unions.

Findings were segregated into three categories: near-term actions for the next two to three years, medium-term strategies for the next five years, and lifetime strategies. Among the study's key recommendations for the Chancellor's office:

- In the near term, seek to become the DoD education information center while establishing a decision-making process that involves stakeholders.** Many organizations similar to the Chancellor's office have successfully developed a reputation as the primary source of quality information about education. In developing a decisionmaking strategy, the office will benefit greatly from involving stakeholders in the pro-

cess. Because each group of stakeholders has its own needs and priorities, the Chancellor's office should define specific strategies for each.

The office will face a number of critical decisions as it establishes governance arrangements to implement its strategic plan. Paying attention to these arrangements while differentiating among multiple ET&D missions will be especially important during the office's formative stage. Over the near term, it will also be important to identify and reach agreement on assessment criteria, standards, and benchmarks for all relevant institutions offering education, training, and development.

- **In the medium term, seek to formulate basic reporting requirements and acquire a role in the program approval process.** The Chancellor's office will need to establish some basic reporting requirements that will help it function. Over time, the office might also seek to acquire legislative authority or gain legislative backing on educational matters. Such authority will give stature and influence to the organization. As the office develops, existing lines of authority may prove to be too complex or unclear. Under these circumstances, the office may wish to make recommendations to remedy the situation.

- **As a lifetime strategy, focus on playing a flexible role while building a constituency for reform.** Organizations in the business of assessing the quality and productivity of postsecondary education always face a changing set of external pressures, particularly vacillations in budgets. As a result, intermediary organizations such as the Chancellor's office must be prepared to help providers adopt a flexible approach to respond to these changes.

As the office works to improve the quality of ED&T programs, it may find that multiple definitions of quality will be necessary to address the many types of institutions and programs evaluated. Success in establishing quality assurance standards may come more easily if the office plays a participatory—rather than commanding—role. A constituency for reform

can be established by involving all stakeholders in the process of improving standards, by sharing information about standards and performance and by offering examples of model practice.

POTENTIAL FUTURE STRATEGIES

A number of collaborative strategies were identified that currently lie outside the charter of the Chancellor's office but that could enhance the quality and cost-effectiveness of ET&D if implemented:

- **Identify workforce incentives to increase participation in ET&D programs.** Quality improvements in DoD civilian ET&D will lead to increased workforce participation in these programs only if the workforce is motivated to take advantage of available opportunities. A potential element of the future strategy of the Chancellor's office will therefore be to identify appropriate workforce incentives and to recommend ways to implement them.
- **Raise awareness of the importance of ET&D.** The office might also take a more active role emphasizing the connection between learning and mission performance.
- **Engage sponsors in the ET&D effort.** Increasing sponsors' awareness of and commitment to DoD educational institutions will be critical for enhancing the quality of the programs offered.
- **Promote a demand-driven system through the coordination of workforce planning, education, and incentive systems.** Another potential role for the Chancellor's office is to work with the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civilian Personnel Policy to integrate assessments of the quality of ET&D into civilian workforce planning.
- **Promote expanded educational opportunities as part of recruitment strategy.** Expanded educational opportunities at DoD can potentially be used to cultivate the existing workforce and help offset its reduced success in recruiting new personnel.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done for the National Defense Research Institute; it is documented in Strategic and Performance Planning for the Office of the Chancellor for Education and Professional Development in the Department of Defense, by Dina G. Levy, Roger Benjamin, Tora Bikson, Eric Derghazarian, James A. Dewar, Susan M. Gates, Tessa Kaganoff, Joy S. Moini, Thomas S. Szayna, and Ron W. Zimmer, MR-1234-OSD, 2001, 171 pp., \$18.00, ISBN: 0-8330-3037-X, available from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: 310-451-7002; toll free 877-584-8642; FAX: 310-451-6915; or email: order@rand.org). Abstracts of RAND documents may be viewed at www.rand.org. Publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, California 90407-2138 • Telephone 310-393-0411 • FAX 310-393-4818
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, Virginia 22202-5050 • Telephone 703-413-1100 • FAX 703-413-8111
201 North Craig Street, Suite 102, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213-1516 • Telephone 412-683-2300 • FAX 412-683-2800